
Aurore Merle and Michael Sztanke, *Étudiants Chinois: qui sont les élites de demain ?*

Paris, Autrement, 2006, 109 pp.

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- 1 Aurore Merle and Michael Sztanke's book is a useful tool in understanding the present generation of Chinese students. There has been little research into this subject, with the existing literature concentrating on their elders, the Tiananmen Generation. However the role and values of this new generation of students are fundamental, since they will make up the elite of tomorrow in a China which will be at the forefront of the world stage. In the preface to the book, Cai Chongguo, a former philosophy professor and political dissident who has been in exile in France since 1989, uncompromisingly sets out the constraints on a generation which has little political awareness and virtually no ideals: (political control combined with the control of history is producing) a generation without memory or dreams, whose identity is fragile, and who are becoming increasingly anxious and standardised.
- 2 Synonymous with success in the *gaokao*, a competitive examination which opens the door to higher education, access to the University is now a dream shared by all Chinese families. In the context of globalisation, China must reform its universities in order to meet the challenge of the "massification" of higher education. Since 1999, access to higher education has broadened but at what cost? Some families have gone into debt to the benefit of the universities. One remembers the vandalism perpetrated by the students in Henan when the diplomas awarded did not bear the name of the prestigious university as had been promised in exchange for exorbitant tuition fees¹. This book raises a number of questions about the transformation of the Chinese university system: how can universities be reformed while maintaining the quality of the teaching and meeting the demands of the job market²? The day-to-day lives of the students on university campuses are revealed, with an emphasis on the state of depression of these

only children obliged to live in a community. The university campuses are like a city within a city, composed of classrooms and housing for the students and their teachers. While they are open to the market economy and to the new trends in society, the campuses remain under the control of the Chinese Communist Party, whose strategy is to integrate the intellectual elite from the beginning of their training. Thus most students belong to the powerful Youth League in order to secure their future rather than through political conviction. Nevertheless they all seem to agree to working towards bringing China's power to a peak internationally. Despite their pragmatism and their desire for individual financial success, some Chinese students question the political system under which they live, by means of more or less discreet social or civil commitments. Many students no longer hesitate to express themselves on Internet sites, and some help those who have been marginalised by economic growth, by rallying to the cause of migrant workers, of the peasants in the west of the country or of the victims of AIDS.

- 3 Blending description, interviews and analysis, the book does not limit itself to providing an external view of the subject in question, but seeks to show the critical point of view the students take of themselves and of the China in which they live.
- 4 At a time when the focus is mostly on the injustices suffered by the peasants and on the emergence of the middle classes, the importance of the student population tends to be forgotten. The questions of the students' feelings of belonging to an elite and of nationalism as well as their desire to see the emergence of a more egalitarian (or more elitist) Chinese society are raised through this fascinating study, which includes numerous interviews carried out in China from 2000 to 2005.

NOTES

1. Cf. Bruno Birolli, "La chasse aux emplois enflamme les universités" ["The job hunt stirs the Universities"], www.nouvelobs.fr
2. 30% of University graduates are unemployed. Cf Yu Yanping "Les jeunes diplômés chinois en butte au chômage" ["Young Chinese Graduates Exposed to Unemployment"], *Perspectives Chinoises*, n°. 80, November-December 2003, pp. 4-12.